

# Honourary Life Members

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## Bruce Gordon

CANS Honourary Life Member 2004



It was more than four decades ago, but you can still hear in his voice the unbridled enthusiasm and excitement Bruce Gordon felt when first arriving in Canada from the United Kingdom. And why not? He was a young man arriving at the start of the 1960s in Montreal, arguably the most cosmopolitan city in the country. What's not to be excited about?

"Frankly it scared me to death, but it also turned me on," Gordon admits as he recalls those first heady days of coming to Canada and joining the small construction firm, Robert M. Miller. "I was thrown into a situation where this little company didn't get work unless I was able to secure it. I never knew the fun side of working before that. It made me feel vital!"

It was also a complete contrast to the rather rigid structure of the construction industry in the U.K., where Gordon received his early training. Over there, he trained as a quantity surveyor – a position that has no real counterpart in North America, the closest thing being an estimator.

"In the U.K. you first have to put in 20 years in the industry and then they'll talk to you. But when I arrived here there was a totally different approach to young people. Here, there was no discrimination because you were young. If you thought you could do it, then they said, 'Go ahead.'"

And go ahead he did. After starting with Robert M. Miller as an estimator in 1959, Gordon quickly rose through the ranks, leaving his original employer to join the Foundation Company of Canada. Just five years after his arrival in Canada, Gordon was appointed assistant district manager of the Maritimes and moved to take up his new position with Foundation Maritime. It was a move that helped define the rest of his career.

"From that time on I managed construction companies of one type or another until the day I retired," Gordon says. "And throughout that time Dartmouth has always been our home base, even when I spent 10 years running Cromarty Construction in Sydney for Jerry Nickerson."

In addition to Cromarty, several other construction companies have sought out Gordon's expertise. He worked for several years each at Cambrian, Fraser Brace, Rocca and McAlpine, before finishing his professional career with a six-year stay in Boston, managing A. Bonfatti and Company Ltd., a division of McAlpine.

"McAlpine is a fabulous company," Gordon says of his final employer. "I was very pleased all my life to say I was in the construction industry."

As for his sojourn south of the 49th parallel, Gordon says the industry in the United States has much in common with its northern neighbour, but there are differences.

"In the U.S. everything is much the same as here in Canada, but it's just a little bit tougher – especially the unions."

Yet, despite the different firms he worked with over the years, Gordon says the project that stands out the most in his memory came about during the late 1980s.

"The Park Lane Mall in Halifax was a particularly heavy challenge," Gordon recalls, "and it was also the first time I worked with McAlpine. At the time I took over it was one year behind schedule and about \$3 million over budget. We not only finished on time for the opening, but also claimed a bonus for meeting the schedule."

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However, Gordon does admit they had a little help in overcoming the time deficit.

"Technically you could say the building was late by three weeks, but I still contend we finished on time because Halifax Developments (the project's owner) wasn't ready on their side of things and had to delay the opening."

No matter where he was working though, the one thing that remained constant during Gordon's career was his commitment to giving back to the industry of which he was so proud to be a part. That commitment began only a year after first coming to the Maritimes when the Construction Association of Nova Scotia (CANS) found itself in need of a committee chairperson.

"My boss at Foundation Maritime at the time was approached by CANS to see if he could spare me to take over one of their committees," Gordon says. "He said yes, so in 1965 I became chair of the Safety Committee and was put on the Board. I just loved every second of my time with CANS and sat on just about every committee there was. And when I ran out of CANS committees I became a charter member and one of the early chairs of the Design and Construction Institute."

Gordon served on the CANS Board for 15 years, including a stint as Association chair and six years as a Nova Scotia representative with the Canadian Construction Association (CCA).

"I believe it was 1975 when I was nominated to join the board of the CCA. Back then, as a single member of a 70-member board, there wasn't a chance to say much. Then a couple years later, after taking over the Chair of CANS, I joined the 14-member executive of the CCA and let me tell you, those guys really work.

"It was a super group of guys and we were all extremely involved in the industry and treated it very seriously, but it was also a time of some really enjoyable experiences."

One of those enjoyable experiences involved the drafting of changes to the standard sub-contracting document used throughout the industry. Gordon was charged with securing the buy-in of both sides to the final draft, but quickly found that neither side appeared willing to compromise. However, appearances can be deceiving.

"I truly expected it to die right there in front of everyone at the CCA meeting, so what a lift it was, a real thrill, when it was approved unanimously. I was speechless," Gordon says.

After several years on the executive, Gordon was approached to become CCA Chair. That's when conflicts between his responsibilities back home and at the national level came to a head.

"For me, Nova Scotia came first, so there never were any conflicts between my roles with CANS and the CCA. Where there was some difficulty was between my work with the Associations and my employer. There was no chance I could take the time needed to be national Chair, so I had to decline and leave the executive and the Board. But it was the culmination of some great years with the CCA and it was really such a thrill to be involved at that level."

Gordon officially retired in 2000, but continues to keep tabs on his old profession, serving on CANS' strategic planning committee just last year. Despite advances in technology and techniques, Gordon says he finds the construction industry of today to be much the same as during his most active years.

"I don't think anything ever really changes," Gordon says. "Everyone always says it's getting harder to make money – we thought that in 1962 and they still do today – but really it's still just a matter of hard work and everyone staying on their toes."

Throughout his career, Gordon enjoyed the full support of his wife, Shelagh, and their four children. In fact, Gordon says Shelagh was "a very important part of all the Association work. I couldn't have done it without her."

Although retired, Gordon says he's busier than ever and has fully embraced one of his other passions, golf.

"I really don't know where I ever found the time to work," he chuckles.